

# THE ARTS

## Reality Bites, but surprisingly, comedy doesn't

### REALITY BITES

Starring Winona Ryder, Ethan Hawke, Ben Stiller, Janeane Garofalo, Swoosie Kurtz, Joe Don Baker, and John Mahoney. Directed by Ben Stiller. Written by Helen Childress.

By Gretchen Koot

Here's something truly amazing: a comedy about the twenty-something generation that actually has something to say. Honestly, I wasn't expecting this movie to be as good as it was. From the trailers I thought the characters would have about as much depth as the ones on Melrose Place and that the plot would revolve around who's

sleeping with whom or who wants to be sleeping with whom. Admittedly while two of the characters are played by Winona Ryder and Ethan Hawke, this might still make for a worthwhile viewing experience. But sex is not what this movie is about. It is about the struggle to find your voice, to find out what is important to you. This is no easy task for a member of a generation in the shadow of the baby boomers.

The movie opens with Lelaina (Winona Ryder) giving her valedictory address to her college class. She asks her fellow graduates what her generation will do with wreckage of the greed driven 80's. "The answer," she says, "is simple." She pauses and looks down at her notecards. Her face registers alarm and she



Ben Stiller, Winona Ryder and Ethan Hawke star in *Reality Bites*, a comedy about love and life for post-Baby Boomers.

begins to shuffle through the cards frantically. Finally, after several painful minutes of panicky shuffling, she says in a wavering voice, "I don't know."

With this crisis over, Lelaina is free and ready to boldly enter the real world. She has fears about her future, but she is hopeful and driven. What she wants is to make documentaries, so she interns on a morning talk show called "Good Morning Grant" while using her free time to document the lives of

her friends. This would seem to be a decent opportunity for Lelaina to find someone to help her learn about television.

Unfortunately, all the people in the position to be mentors in this movie are too self-absorbed to do so. In one scene, Lelaina is at the talk show studio editing her documentary when her boss, Grant, walks in. He looks the part of the wise, benevolent grandfather. He has the distinguished gray hair and, at least while on camera, the friendly smile. But he gruffly rebuffs Lelaina's attempts to get him to review her work. When she tries to give him extra background information about one of his guests, he just snarls at her and says, "Just give me the questions." And so we see behind the facade. Grant is just there to look grandfatherly for the camera and so, Lelaina discovers, she is on her own.

Amidst her distress about work, she meets Michael (Ben Stiller) who is a television executive for an MTV-like network. Their awkward first date was wonderfully acted by both Ryder and Stiller. It is sure to make you squirm as well as laugh. When they later sit in Michael's convertible sipping slurpies and talking, you know that this isn't love but it's alright.

Lelaina's new relationship with Michael forces her best friend, Troy (Ethan Hawke), to begin recognizing his love for Lelaina. Hawke's performance is wonderfully subtle. Through all Troy's bravado, we can see him for who he really is, someone who is desperately afraid to go after what matters to him. He is constantly making jokes to avoid having to really say anything, and there are moments

between the laughter that we can see the anguish this causes him. At one point, Michael accuses him of being a jester and makes some convoluted reference to the Jester's skull which Hamlet ponders. But Troy is not really the jester. He is Hamlet. He constantly steps to the edge of action only to quickly pull back.

Lelaina also must decide what she wants. Michael is responsible and fun, but from their scenes together it is plain that they don't have any deep connection. With Troy on the other hand, Lelaina really has something to lose. This conflict could easily have turned into the formula of responsible boring guy vs. sexy bad boy, but it didn't. For Lelaina to make a decision, she has to decide what is important to her and what she really has with each of these men.

Of course, this movie is a comedy and a funny one. The best thing about Troy's constant joking is that his lines are good and Hawke delivers them well. When Lelaina returns from her first date with Michael, Troy begins taunting her about it, calling Michael a yuppie. When Lelaina protests, saying "He's not a Yuppie," Troy quips, "He's the reason Cliff Notes were invented." Later in the movie, Lelaina has a hilarious low point where she runs up a phone bill of hundreds of dollars to the psychic friends network. The vulnerability Winona shows us in Lelaina allows us to laugh at her and feel for her simultaneously. The wonderful performances and insightful writing by Helen Childress and directing by Ben Stiller make this a very entertaining movie.

## Alice's EP unchained from grungy self-indulgence

### JAR OF FLIES

Alice in Chains. Columbia Records.

By Scott Deskin  
ASSOCIATE ARTS EDITOR

Grunge is out. A friend of mine revealed this to me last June in a city not far from Seattle, Washington, grunge capital of the world. For me, his preemptive statement seemed to tarnish the follow-up albums of Pearl Jam, Nirvana, and other "grunge" acts before they were even released late last year. For a while, it seemed that record companies took the grunge hype seriously and then tried to exploit it for all it was worth. Like punk rock in the late 70s, grunge was supposed to shake up the music industry and create a resurgence of hard-hitting guitar-based rock in the pop charts.

Of course, the whole grunge movement was a myth. And a letdown of the fickle world of pop music was inevitable: no longer blessed with a song with pop/rock crossover explosiveness (e.g., Nirvana's "Smells Like Teen Spirit" or Pearl Jam's "Alive") the two most popular grunge acts failed to resonate with their pop audience to the degree that made their previous albums so surprising. Both Nirvana and Pearl Jam owe much of their success to a primary crossover into the singles charts, but are now focusing their efforts toward a largely rock/alternative audience.

Alice in Chains is no exception to the above formula. Slowly (but not quietly), they earned respect with *Facelift* (1990), and then upped the ante with an album heavily steeped in drug/heroin motifs with *Dirt* (1992). The relative heaviness of material contained in their sophomore effort did not faze record-buyers (producing the hits "Rooster" and

"Would?"), but was greeted less enthusiastically by critics who felt that guitarist Jerry Cantrell's and vocalist Layne Staley's music was a bit *too* weighty and self-indulgent.

There is no such problem with their third release, an EP entitled *Jar of Flies*. This seven-song set captures the same lyrical message and angst of previous albums, but in a much more subdued setting. Sharply contrasting with slabs of neo-grunge-metal from their other albums, songs like "I Stay Away" and "No Excuses" are executed with a more relaxed, natural, and less visceral feel.

But this doesn't mean that this group is making an acoustic-based retreat or is coasting on in-between album filler. It is mood music, blending Staley's distinctive, throaty baritone with the usual guitar, bass, and drums and the wistful baroque feel from a supporting cast of violins. The lyrics, as usual, are filled with disgust, fear, and longing ("Hands are

bruised.../Drained and blue/I bleed for you/You think it's funny, well/You're drowning in it too" from "No Excuses"), but without Staley screaming the refrains, the songs become miles more personal and poignant. Even "Whale and Wasp," an instrumental, fits seamlessly with the other songs on the album.

In fact, this may be Alice in Chains' best piece of work to date. Unlike U2's *Zooropa*, which alienated some listeners by trying to be too avant-garde, *Jar of Flies* is instantly accessible to popular listening, or — dare I say — a radio-ready format. Still steeped in confusion and angst, Alice in Chains may not win over a whole new audience from the pop realm. But with this album, Alice in Chains is ready to take a harder look at the musical movement and marketing strategy called "grunge" that spawned them, confront it, and go on to explore the edges of rock, alternative, or whatever they like.

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